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Reporters are sent to Coventry

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BEALETON — A Soviet intelligence agent's claim that he was kidnapped and held by the Central Intelligence Agency in a safe house near Fredericksburg drew a flock of reporters yesterday to a place called Coventry, a wooded subdivision in Fauquier County.

Vitaly Yurchenko, who had been a senior official of the KGB, twice mentioned the name Coventry during a Monday news conference. He described his alleged place of captivity as being a house on a lake, 22 miles from Fredericksburg on U.S. 17. He also said that the house was on 500 acres.

The description generally fits Coventry, a subdivision just off U.S. 17 in thick woods around a lake.

As a motorist approaches from the north, the last sign before Coventry notes that Fredericksburg is 22 miles away.

A sign posted inside Coventry describes it as a 500-acre "master planned community" of 5- to 12-acre lots. Only nine houses have been built, one resident said.

Several residents were informed by reporters yesterday morning of the sudden international interest in their neighborhood.

One woman, who said she had not been aware of any unusual activity in the preceding weeks, said the neighborhood is "very quiet. That's what we like about it."

Another resident said all the houses have been occupied with the exception of one, which was rented after being vacant for a while.

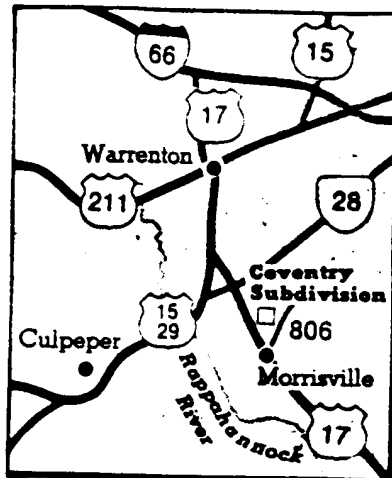
She said rumor had it that the house, whose back yard slopes to the lake, had been rented to a corporate lawyer.

Last weekend "there were quite a few lights" at the house, the woman said. "I just thought they were having a party or something."

Yesterday, newspaper and television reporters gathered at the light blue house. No one answered the doorbell or responded to knocks.

According to Fauquier tax records, the lakefront house, on 10 acres, is owned by Clifton R. Strathern.

Louise Dann, a realtor with Long & Foster in New Baltimore who said she has a listing for the house, said it is occupied. Strathern arranged for



Staff graphic

Site is in Fauquier County

the rental and she did not know the names of the tenants, she said.

She described Strathern as being involved in "a great many fields of endeavors," but she said she did not believe he would answer questions about whether the property was a CIA safe house because he is "retired CIA himself." The position he held, she said, is confidential.

She said Strathern travels "all over the country making speeches and acting as an instructor since he's retired."

An official at Fauquier High School said Strathern taught history there

for a year and a half, during 1981-1983 or 1982-1984.

Strathern, reached by telephone in Fairfax, twice hung up on a reporter.

The first time, asked whether his Coventry house had been used by the CIA, he replied, "I would know nothing about that and if I did I certainly wouldn't talk about it. So thank you very much."

Asked in a second call whether he had worked for the CIA, he said, with a chuckle, "That's a ridiculous question. I'm not going to discuss anything with you and I certainly don't discuss my private business with strangers. Thank you very much."

Officials of the CIA and the State Department also refused to discuss the matter.

"We haven't had anything to say about either Mr. Yurchenko's comments or Mr. Yurchenko himself," said Patti Volz, a CIA spokesperson. "If anything is going to be released on it, it will come from the State Department."

Joseph Reap, a press officer for the State Department, also refused to discuss Coventry and the house.

"That question came up at our briefing today and our spokesman would not address a question like that. . . . There is no comment on that from here. It's allegedly a place belonging to the CIA and we don't comment on intelligence activities or alleged intelligence activities."